THE GROWTH MARATHON

One Stride At a Time

SIX CONCEPTS FROM ATOMIC HABITS

TGM

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Introduction

You need better habits. You might be sharing the same sentiment as me, but I grew tired of hearing my subconscious telling me this.

On my continuous quest for growth, I've always wanted to find the simplest and most effective way to progress each day. The obvious way is to develop good habits. I've heard that numerous times, I don't know about you, but it has always been a challenge for me to stick to a habit that might be helpful to me. I've always known it was because I had not fully given myself the time to understand what habits are and how they work.

I recently went through Atomic Habits by James Clear, and this article will take us through the ideas that resonated the most with me (more theoretical). This is just the first in a series of articles based on Atomic Habits. The next one(s) will be more practical based and will provide you with some techniques I like, and I've tested from the book, and others I developed. It might or might not be of help, let's see.

What are Habits, and are they important?

We all have a rough idea of what a habit is. It is an activity or behavior that is repeated frequently, gradually requiring less willpower to enact, and in some cases becoming completely subconscious. Before moving any further, as James indicates, it is important to keep in mind that Habits are about becoming someone, habits are evidence of identity.

Take a moment and think of 3 of your daily habits. How much attention do you need when actioning those habits? Do you pay full attention? Or can you multitask and at the same time think about that OP anime character with mind-bending powers?

This brings us to the importance of habits. We all have limited time, hence the more productive actions (actions that allow us to grow into the person we envision as successful) we transform into habits, the more willpower we free up, helping us to achieve more throughout our lives while at the same time improving daily. Think about it for a second, willpower can be depleted throughout the day as Cal Newport indicates in Deep Work (another excellent book I recommend). You can only do a limited number of activities that demand a lot of willpower throughout your day. Once an activity becomes a habit, you use less power, hence freeing up space to take on an extra challenge throughout the day. There are other reasons why Habits are important, but that is the main one for me.

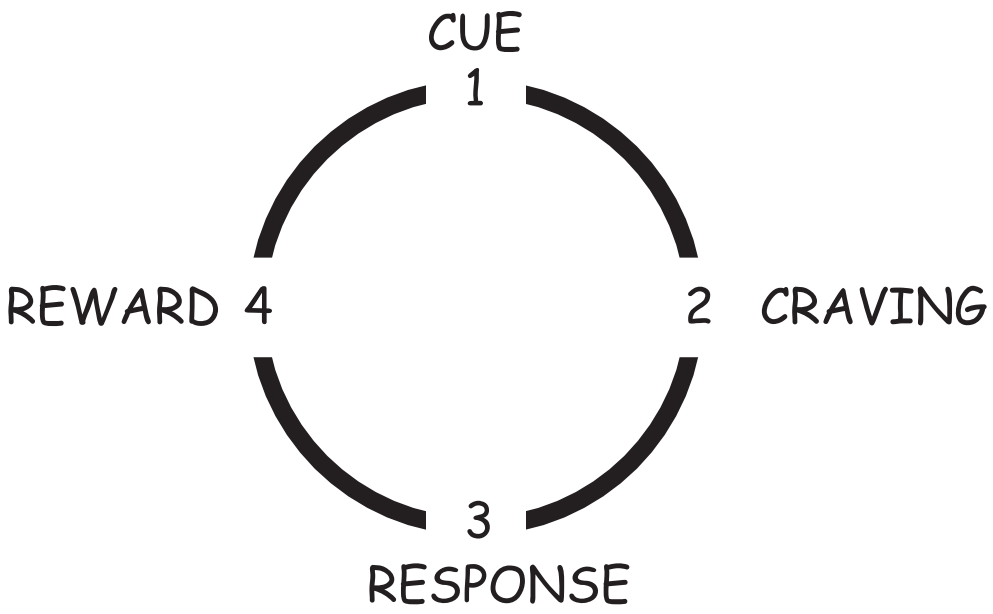
Concepts that resonated with me

I will not summarize Atomic Habits in this article, but rather put forward the concepts that I deemed the most important. This article is the first of four articles I will publish on Atomic Habits.

1) Habit Loop (Objective, What is it? What is the use?)

To understand how a car works, and to be able to tweak it as you wish, you need to know what is going on under the hood, the mechanism needs to be clear to you. I believe it's the same with something like developing new habits and breaking old habits.

The habit loop shows the sequence of stages responsible for the development of a habit. The higher the completion frequency of the loop for any activity, the more automatic it becomes. James suggests that this loop runs at every moment of our lives.



Let’s have a look at what each phase of the loop represents;

- The **Cue** represents the trigger to a habit. It is the event, action, thought, motive that starts the habit loop. As James indicates, cues trigger your brain to initiate a behavior. Cues need to have meaning to initiate any form of response (I think the meaning is derived from the reward the person might have gotten or expects to get from a behavior).

Example: If a smoker sees a cigarette, he/she expects/predicts a feeling after smoking that cigarette. A non-smoker would probably not be bothered by the cigarette.

- The **Craving** is the drive behind a habit. I liked James’ explanation of craving and its link to our reward systems, so I’ll expand more on it. What you crave is the change in state a habit delivers, not the habit itself (e.g., you don’t crave to watch TV, but rather to be entertained, you don’t crave to drink, but rather to feel drunk etc.). The prediction of the change in state creates the desire/craving. Getting a reward and expecting a reward activate the same reward system in the brain. But the brain has more circuitry allocated to wanting rewards compared to getting them, hence

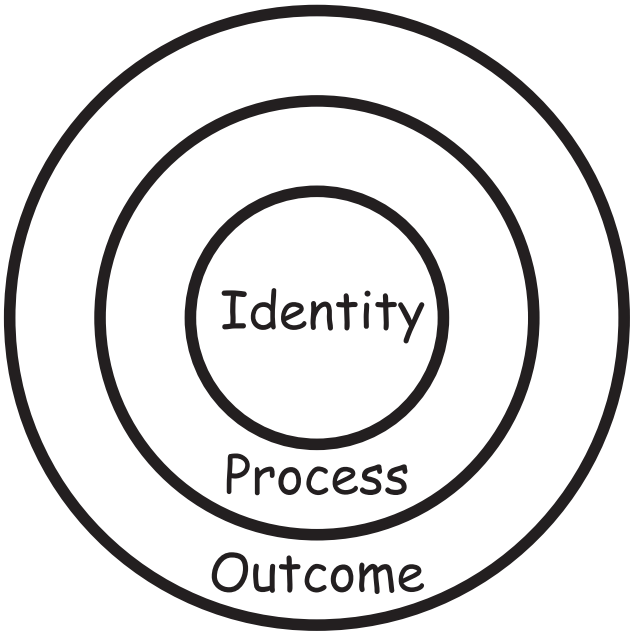
the importance of craving. If we do not want/desire/crave a reward, we have no motivation to perform the tasks required to attain that reward, even if the reward in itself is pleasurable. Cravings basically link the cue to the response. This is linked to dopamine. Dopamine plays a crucial role in making a habit attractive. Without dopamine, we still feel pleasure, but we have no motivation or craving for that pleasure. I touch on a tool James developed to ensure we tap into this craving (Temptation Bundling) in this article.

- The **Response** is about obtaining the reward. It is the action that ensures you obtain the reward. For example, if you feel extremely cold (the cue), you predict that warming up (the craving), let's say by lighting firewood (the response) will make you feel comfortable (the reward in this case), hence you go ahead and light the firewood. The response is as important as the cue and the craving because without it there is no habit.
- The **Reward** is the "prize" you get for completing the habit, and it is what keeps the loop intact and solidifies the habit.

In summary, the cue is about noticing the reward, the craving is about wanting the reward and the response is about obtaining the reward. Without the cue, craving and response, a habit will not occur, without the reward, a behavior will not be repeated.

2) Layers of Behavior Change

James describes that there are different ways to change a habit, via a change in outcomes, a change in processes, and a change in identity. These three are what he calls layers of behavior change. Outcomes are about what you get, processes are about what you do, and identity is about what you believe. When it comes to building habits that last, the **direction of change** is the most important factor. According to James, identity-based habits are more sustainable than outcome-based habits.



It seems like in most cases of failed habit changes, people want to change an outcome and, in the journey, adjust their processes, but never change their own beliefs, and this sabotages them in the long run. These are **outcome-based habits**, like wanting an A in physics instead of wanting to be the type of person who understands physics. The former can lead to the latter in some cases, but I suspect the latter will lead to the former in significantly more cases.

True behavior change is identity change. Sustainable habits are **identity-based habits** because once you have changed your identity, you do not need a lot of motivation to complete a habit, hence there is less friction (resistance to your actions). Identity-based habits imply starting with who you want to become and then moving outwards. I thought about this and it was a bit difficult for me to understand because you cannot just change your identity, you need to do things repeatedly for a certain duration before you can change your identity. Hence, I believe that initially, identity-based habits are outcome-based habits, but your outcome is actually the identity you want to embrace. And once you have achieved that identity, it is easier to stick to it. Let me know what you think about this.

3) 4 Laws of Behavior Change

Let's now look at how to develop habits and break habits we don't like. James presents a framework that can be used to create good habits and break bad ones, called the **4 laws of behavior change**.

To create good habits, the laws are as follows;

- Cue, the **First law**, make it obvious.
- Craving, the **Second law**, make it attractive.
- Response, the **Third law**, make it easy.
- Reward, the **Fourth law,** make it satisfying.

To deal with bad habits, you just need to invert these laws

- Cue, **Inversion of the first law,** make it invisible.
- Craving, **Inversion of the second law,** make it unattractive.
- Response, **Inversion of the third law,** make it difficult.
- Reward, **Inversion of the fourth law,** make it unsatisfying.

James provides a great summary of those laws and how to achieve them in this cheat sheet. I provide some target exercises I developed to complement these laws and I expand on these laws in this article.

4) Immediate and delayed rewards

Understanding these two concepts was eye-opening to me because with that knowledge I understood why it's so easy to chill on YouTube, or snack whenever I can and more.

Pleasure teaches the brain that a behavior is worth remembering and repeating, and the duration of the pleasure after that behavior is quite important. The sooner you reward yourself, the higher the chances that your brain would like to repeat that behavior in the future, and the converse is true. This is what James calls the cardinal rule of behavior change, "***what is immediately rewarded is repeated, what is immediately punished is avoided***".

This is because our brains prefer instant gratification as opposed to delayed gratification. Animals live in an immediate reward environment (killed or be killed), and our ancestors were with those animals not too long ago. Fortunately for us, our societies rapidly developed, moving from an immediate reward environment to a delayed reward environment (you get paid at the middle or end of the month, you only see the results of workouts several weeks down the line, etc.). But our reward systems (in our brains) did not develop as fast and are still stuck in the past, hence we still favor instant gratification over delayed gratification.

Most of the time, behaviors that feel pleasant immediately have costs in the future if they are perpetuated, while behaviors with immediate costs (sore muscles, tiredness from working, etc.) typically pay off in the future. James indicates that research backs this up, individuals who are better at delayed gratification have higher SAT scores, lower levels of substance abuse, lower likelihood of obesity, better response to stress, etc.

But sticking to delayed gratification is not easy, unless you go with your reward system flow, and plan an immediate reward after a behavior you want to repeat. This will signal to your brain that the behavior is worth remembering and repeating. These incentives will start the process of habit formation, but an idea that is repeatedly stated in the book is that identity sustains habits. Once you believe you are that type of person, you will need fewer incentives to motivate you.

James proposes a technique for this that he calls **Reinforcement.** This is a technique that links the end of a habit to an immediate reward. I touch on this technique here.

5) Systems vs Goals

We are constantly bombarded with the idea of having goals (which is of great importance I believe, as it gives you a clear direction as to where you wish to go), but this should be complemented by the idea of having systems, especially if we are trying to change (identity-based habits).

Goals are about the results you want to achieve, while systems are the processes that lead to those results. I agree with James when he suggests that results have everything to do with systems. Those who fail at achieving their goals probably have worse systems than those who achieve them.

There is also the concept of timespan James mentions when it comes to goals. Achieving a goal is a momentary change, once you achieve it, that's it. I don't see anything wrong with having a momentary change if that's all that you seek,

but to have a long-term change, you need a system of continual small improvements.

In my opinion, it's best to just see these as concepts that can help us in planning our future steps. Once we have determined our goals, we should put systems in place to achieve those goals. Once those goals have been achieved, you can either discard that system or stick to it for longer, it all depends on what you want down the road.

6) Robust Identities

A key concept of habit formation is its link to identity. Initially, incentives might keep you motivated to stick to a habit, but for the habit to stay in the long run, you need to be the type of person who has that habit. James expands on this idea throughout the book, and I think that's only a logical outcome, even if you have not set up your objective to become a certain type of person, doing a habit long enough will make your brain see you as such a person, and if you really like being such a person you can motivate yourself even without incentives. The resistance to action weakens.

The way you identify yourself is also important, when you cling too much to one aspect of your identity you become brittle, lose that one thing and you lose yourself (e.g., if you describe yourself mainly as a vegan and you find yourself eating meat for a reason or another, you might have an identity crisis). If your whole life you define yourself in one way and that disappears, who are you now?

James proposes ways to mitigate loss of identity. He suggests that you redefine yourself such that you get to keep important aspects of your identity even if your particular role changes (e.g., I am an athlete becomes I am the type of person who is mentally tough and loves physical challenges). When chosen carefully, an identity can be flexible instead of brittle. Your identity should work with the changing circumstances.

The link I am trying to point out between habits and robust identities is as follows; if you are developing a habit and your definition of the identity associated with it is brittle, you might easily lose motivation to continue with that habit once you lose that one thing that defined that identity. This might be unclear, hence let me use an example, if you want to run a marathon for example, and you realize at some point that you have a condition that makes you unable to do marathons, instead of abandoning your training altogether and the system associated to it, you can switch to a different form of physical exercise but still link it to the identity of being mentally tough and loving physical challenges. With this way of thinking, you are a bit more flexible and can adjust to different circumstances.

Conclusion

This article's objective was to present you with the concepts I found the most important after going through Atomic Habits by James Clear. I covered a few concepts:

- Definition of habits and their importance
- Habit Loop
- 4 Habit Laws
- Immediate and delayed rewards
- Systems vs goals
- Robust identities.

This is the first of a series of articles I will be writing on Atomic Habits. I encourage you to go through Atomic Habits yourself, some other concepts might resonate more with you. Let me know what resonated most with you about this article in the comment section.